

Two things, madness and the asylum, are now if anything more inextricably united than Porter saw them becoming in the 19th century. People's experiences, delusional or otherwise, are inextricably bound up with the physical layout of the place. Perhaps the surprising thing is the survival into the 20th century of essentially 19th-century and earlier kinds of writing. Apart from the Asylum itself, a huge exception since as a whole it compromised a kind of "psychiatric" treatment, in the above "Case Files" there is still less protest at specific medical treatments than at the violation of individual rights through confinement. The physical abuse of nurses and attendants so often objected to by patients -- was seen as an abuse not of a psychiatric but of a bureaucratic order. Nurses acted this way, not because they were executing the orders of a sinister profession but because they were (according to some patients) vulgar, the naturally brutal hirelings of a corrupt and venal government. When the doctors were sinister, it was usually for abuses of a civil order. At their worst they looked more like bad counsellors (or ambitious rival priests) than mad scientists, especially considering that until the 1920s their principal therapies were bathing, rest, and diet.

Apart from the Asylum itself, the greatest abuse that could be attributed specifically to a "psychiatric regime," was the increased gathering and recording of personal information as part of the intensified "individual approach" advocated by C.K. Clarke as a basis for more scientific classification. But the reading and confiscation of patients' private letters and papers, was (understandably) what most obviously concerned them in this regard -- and it was nothing new.

Most of the people whose works are featured here are writing for their lives against a bureaucracy that had already mastered that game. The presence of patients' letters and other papers in their files nearly a century later shows how. Many of the patients knew what was going on and wrote anyway (a kind of Pascal's wagering, hoping something would get out), or started addressing their letters to "Dear Reader" --- or to posterity. A great deal of material was smuggled out by other patients or by visitors -- in this regard the Asylum was never "total." Dr. McClenahan observed in 1917 that Miss Adams got more mail than all the rest of the patients together, so a lot got out somehow.

(Narrating Admission)